CHAPTER III

THE MERCANTILE CENTER

The mountainous character of the Rowandus region, its many peaks and gorges, acts to limit the amount of arable land. It would be difficult to estimate the actual extent of the land which might be brought under cultivation, but it could only be a smaller part of the entire area. Wide, level stretches of land are to be found, such as the plains about Batas or Dyana, but many other holdings are no more than strips cut into hillsides or cliffs. On the other hand, in the absence of mineral exploitation or industry, a high percentage, perhaps 80%, of the population is directly engaged in agriculture or animal husbandry, and the productive wealth of the district is almost wholly derived from these two pursuits.

Game is not abundant, and hunting and fishing cannot be said to add any important supplement to the food supply. In the town of Rowandus itself there are four professional fishermen and a hunter, but their activities are seasonal, and they have additional employment. Ibex, the long-horned mountain goat, is hunted chiefly for sport, and strong-smelling skins and horns are exhibited as trophies by local huntsmen. In accordance with Quranic prescription, if such game is to be eaten, it must be bled while still "alive," after having been brought down with a rifle. The local

The local
mountain partridge (Kurdish, shikew) makes a regularly favored dish, and is clubbed or snared. Wolves are occasionally shot in winter for their pelts, and a few furs may always be seen hanging in the shops of merchants in Rowanduz. Snow leopards and bears are only rarely encountered. Numerous stories surround bears and their predilection for honey. They are thought to be in some way akin to humans, and tales of their abduction of women for mates are frequent. Fishing, carried on with nets or bombs of blasting powder, is similarly limited, and the largest catch is a type of carp.

Animal husbandry constitutes one of the most important activities of the area, because wool and skins are two of its few valuable exports. The animals so utilized are the black-haired goat and fat-tailed sheep, the latter often stained with some mark in red ochre as a "brand." From the sheep and goats wool, skins, flesh, and milk are obtained. Cattle have utility as beasts of burden, and are only rarely slaughtered for their meat. The dairy products of all these animals constitute a large part of the daily diet as milk, mast (artificially curdled milk, yoghurt), butter, and cheese. Gi or clarified butter is commonly used in cooking, in competition with industrially produced vegetable oil, and is prepared by agitating a milk-filled sheepskin suspended from a wooden tripod and allowing the butter to melt. It has been noted that the kotchir or nomads seem to act as shepherds for the entire area, but they do not exercise an exclusive monopoly, for almost

carried into town and hung from metal hooks on a wall between two shops. By ten o'clock in the morning the butcher's day is finished, and, aside from the slaughtering-place and the sales' display on hooks, he has no other place of business. Only two or three animals are killed each day, always sheep or goats, because cattle, in their utility in agriculture and the impossibility of profitably disposing of so large a quantity of meat, are almost never killed. The butchers purchase their animals from villagers or kotchir, and sell the dressed meat to their patrons. All parts of the beast are disposed of, if not by humans, then by dogs, and by noon the slaughtering-place is bare, save for a few blackened stains of blood on the gravel. The butchers' greatest days of business occur on the first days of the feasts of Jayjani Ramazan (the 'Ayd al-saghir, "the lesser feast," which ends the fast of Ramadan on the first days of the tenth lunar month) and Jayjani Qurban (the 'Ayd al-kabir, "the greater feast," which begins on the tenth day of the twelfth lunar month) when every family able to afford the expense has a sheep or a goat slaughtered in sacrifice. Most households purchase their animals in advance, keeping them in the houseyard until the day of the feast.

That the fishermen and the hunter are only seasonally employed has already been noticed. They offer their respective catches in the bazar at large, or go from door to door among the wealthier households. Villagers with chikaw

are unemployed, devoting their days to leisure. There are no organized adult sports of any sort in the town. Several of the young men who own rifles and shotguns do some hunting, and a great many love excursions into the countryside, such as a picnic at the waterfall of Baykhal behind the town. For everyday entertainment most men prefer the physical inactivity of the guest-rooms, the tea-shops, or the gardens. Tawli or backgammon and dama or checkers are played at great length, while shatranj, chess, has almost disappeared, although it is still remembered from Ottoman times. One thing universally regretted by the townspeople is the disappearance of the wandering story-tellers who, in consideration of a bounty, held forth in the tea-shops or the guest-rooms of the chieftains, nor have they been replaced, for the town boasts no cinema, radios are few in number, and newspapers or books are never regularly received. Some of the townsmen have a considerable repertoire of stories, many concerning such comic figures as Abu Nuwas or Mulla Nasir al-Din, but it is said that they cannot compare with the artistry displayed by the old professionals. A short story of Abu Nuwas, as told in Rowanduz, will provide an example of the type of anecdote:

> One day Abu Nuwas borrowed a small cooking vessel from his neighbor, and on the next, after hiding the original pot, returned one much larger and of greater value. "The pot is different," remarked the neighbor cautiously, puzzled by the change. "The pot gave birth," returned Abu Nuwas, "and I have returned its offspring." "Marvellous!" cried the neighbor, pleased with his gain, "I welcome the son of the pot." Thereafter Abu Nuwas borrowed each